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Alex King was born and raised in London. He attended the University of Sheffield as an undergraduate and earned his doctorate from Oxford. He was a postdoc at Oxford and then M.I.T. before joining the faculty at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, where he also served as the Vice Provost for Graduate Studies (Dean of the Graduate School). He was the Head of the School of Materials Engineering at Purdue in from 1999 to 2007, the Director of DOE's Ames Laboratory from 2008 until 2013, and since June 2013 he has been the Director of the Critical Materials Institute – one of DOE's four Energy Innovation Hubs.

A distinguished teacher and researcher, King is a Fellow of the Institute of Mining Minerals and Materials; ASM International; and the Materials Research Society. He was also a Visiting Fellow of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science in 1996 and a US Department of State Jefferson Science Fellow for 2005-06.

Alex King was the President of MRS for 2002, Chair of the University Materials Council of North America for 2006-07, Co-chair of the Gordon Conference on Physical Metallurgy for 2006, and Chair of the APS Interest Group on Energy Research and Applications for 2010.